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FILE TITLE: An Essay on Enlisted Aviation

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SENIOR NON COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ACADEMY

ON ENLISTED AVIATION

by

SMSgt Donald F. Miller

6 Dec 95

Little has been written about them, but their bravery, exploits and dedication will live on forever. As an enlisted member of the United States Armed Forces it is paramount that we know as much as possible about our enlisted heritage. This is important not only to satisfy our own curiosity about the enlisted members who went before us, but more importantly to pass this tradition on to the enlisted members who will come after us. I would like to briefly discuss and inform you about the enlisted aviation heritage from its early days through World War II. Additionally, I would like to inform you about some of the enlisted pilots who went on to become air aces and aviation heroes. First, let's review our enlisted aviation history.

In August, 1907, the War Department authorized the formation of the Aeronautical Division, authorizing one officer and two enlisted men.(4:10) This order charged the three men with all military matters pertaining to balloons and air machines. At this time the military owned very few airplanes. Those they did have were assembled and maintained by this fledgling Aeronautical Division. Their primary mission then was reconnaissance. Information they gathered was primarily

flying duties.(2:15) Then, only commissioned pilots were allowed to carry the US mail. Eventually, though, enlisted pilots were also used to carry mail as well as commissioned pilots. Often an irate postmaster was heard to say he didn't care who flew the mail, officer or enlisted, as long as it got where it was supposed to go on time.(6:22) During the 1930s, the total number of enlisted pilots rose as high as 134, dropped to around 44 and by the time the US became involved in World War two there were only 37 active duty enlisted pilots.(6:22) However, that number would soon change as US involvement in the war escalated.

By 1941 the war in Europe had been going on for nearly two years. Congress finally recognized the need for qualified aviators. Later that year congress reluctantly passed Public Law 99 which provided conditional pilot training to enlisted members. Graduates of this training program were awarded their pilot wings and warranted as Staff Sergeants.(2:1) As these enlisted aviator slots in the US Army Air Corps were in high demand and short supply, many American enlisted men joined the Canadian and English Royal Air Forces flying and fighting in the Battle of Britain as enlisted pilots, bombardiers, navigators and fire control officers.(4:12) This information sent shock waves rippling through the United States Army Air corps as enlisted pilots were often given command of the airplane while an officer sat in the right seat as copilot. Eventually in 1942 Congress passed Public Law 658 which made all Staff Sergeant pilots produced by the previous program, and all those that followed *Flight Officers*. A caveat of this new law stated that aircraft commanders without exception must be commissioned officers. Sadly, this reserved forever the flight deck for

commissioned officers only. Fortunately for the Army Air Corps, many ex-patriot enlisted pilots switched sides and rejoined the United States Army Air Corps, bringing with them years of real combat experience.

By the end of 1942 the Army Air Corps had graduated over 2100 qualified enlisted pilots with the new rank of flight officer. Originally the Army had intended to use the flying sergeants as a ferry service or flying duties other than combat such as flying tow darts for aerial target practice training new fighter pilots and enlisted gunners on heavy bombers, far removed from the front lines.(1:9-10) As the need for fully qualified pilots continued to climb the Army was forced to use these enlisted pilots in virtually the same role as commissioned pilots.(1:17.) Chief Master Sergeant Walter F. Mayer, (ret) enlisted in 1941 and was serving as a clerk at a base in Florida. He volunteered and soon completed the rigorous flying school and received the coveted pilots wings at Maxwell Field, Alabama.(3:2) Mayer's skills as a pilot were soon noted and landed him a demanding job flying seven days a week as a test pilot. He and several other enlisted pilots were stationed at Wright-Patterson Field, Ohio. They flight and operationally tested several different airplanes as they came off the assembly line. According to Mayer, they mostly flew L-5s, P-47s, and P-51s.(3:9-10) Enlisted pilots that graduated from class 42J, one class ahead of Mayer became full fledged fighter-pilots and were soon engaged in combat in North Africa.

The proud history of these dedicated flying sergeants was not limited to the continental United States, and North Africa. The history of the Fourteenth Air Force is steeped with the exploits of many little known enlisted pilots. The China Liaison Squadron of the Fourteenth Air Force, commanded by Major General Chennault, better known as the Flying Tigers, was primarily made up of enlisted pilots. (9:1) Their job was flying medicine, food and supplies to the Chinese nationals fighting the Japanese. The extreme dangers of this job were further exacerbated by the limitations of the L-5 aircraft used to fly the hump. These planes were designed to operate efficiently at 3000 feet. Most of the air fields were built in mountain valleys 6000 feet above sea level. Flying the hump often required these pilots to fly routinely above 10,000 feet in order to clear the peaks of the mountains. One brave pilot reported that he flew in excess of 16,000 feet clearing a peak. (9:2-3) This may appear on the face as a typical feat, but flying at those altitudes in the primitive aircraft of the day demanded a lot of skill--and guts. The dangers of the China Liaison Squadron were not only caused by the limitations of their machines and terrain in which they flew.

Apart from the hazards addressed above, the flying sergeants also had to contend with a hostile enemy that was not at all happy about the vital support they provided the Chinese. Technical Sergeant Vernon Decker, pilot, scored yet another first for the 14 AF. He and his passenger, a Chinese interpreter were the first Americans to land at a reoccupied jungle runway near Roseh, China. The date was 28 May 45, and the Y-Forces (Chinese Combat Command) were attempting to

establish an air corridor through the Himalayas on the on the road to Japan. The unit history from 1945 is paraphrased as follows: The pilot (TSgt Decker) had never landed at this runway before. He circled several times looking for "Jap" snipers, and a place to land between the bomb craters, barbed wire, and pools of water. Decker was even more apprehensive knowing full well the Japs had mined the airfield before their hasty departure. Decker eventually landed the P-51 and came to a halt just 20 feet short of a Japanese land mine. (9:2-3) Another extract from the unit history tells of TSgt Devane being chased all the way home by two Japanese Zeros. He landed his L-5 safely and quickly exited his plane and was forced to play hide and seek with the Zeros, hiding behind heavy equipment as they repeatedly strafed the landing field with heavy-caliber machine gun fire. They eventually left (probably low on fuel) and Sergeant Devane lived to fly another day.(9:8-9) The history of the 14 AF Chinese Liaison Squadron goes on with more exploits of the enlisted airmen. A common theme throughout the history is that extraordinary feats of bravery and airmanship became common place for the flying sergeants. Their contribution to the war effort, and the subsequent defeat of the Japanese Army must never be diminished or forgotten.

Sadly, the enlisted flying, and flight officer program died at the end of World War two. Hundreds of enlisted aviators received their commission and helped shape the new United States Air Force. I would be remiss if I didn't mention a few of these enlisted aviators whose names will live on forever in the annals of aviation history.

Colonel Harold "Popp" Gunn (ret) in his oral history spoke of the skill and airmanship

of Sergeant Raymond Stockwell, better known as Uncle Chew as he always had a plug of tobacco in his mouth. His skill as an aviator and knowledge of geography, especially the Northwestern United States up to Alaska helped draw accurate maps and were used in the development of the Alaskan frontier and construction of highways from the continental United States to Alaska. Colonel Gunn himself started his career as a flying sergeant. He is responsible for drafting the first training plans used for pilot training. Many plans although revised, are still in use today. His action helped to standardize aviation training throughout the Army Air Corps. Brigadier General Chuck Yeager started his career as a flying sergeant.(1:29-30) His bravery and skill as a test pilot are recognized the world over. Yeager was always on the cutting edge of aviation and helped launch the United States Air Force into the jet age. From the ranks of enlisted pilots, seventeen became Aces and eleven were promoted the flag officer or general ranks. (4:13) One hundred and fifty-five died in aerial combat. Hundreds more unsung enlisted heroes did their job well while piloting airplanes in the service of their country.

The enlisted pilots saw duty over the skies of North Africa, Europe, the Pacific, and the treacherous Himalayas *flying the hump*. They served as ferry pilots, VIP and troop transport pilots. They delivered the mail, spare parts, bombs, bullets and medical supplies. They helped launch the aviation history of the United States. They took part in geological surveys and helped map unknown territory. They served in virtually every role; they performed the exact same duties as the commissioned pilots did. They died in the service of their country. Each one of us,

as enlisted members should be more than aware of our proud enlisted aviation heritage. Our enlisted heritage started in 1911 when Corporal Vernon Burge learned to fly his Wright Model C aeroplane. It endured lean times through the depression and had its apex during World War two. Learn and remember the vital role that the enlisted aviator played in the successes enjoyed by the United States. More importantly, pass on the history of the Flying Sergeants to the troops that follow you to ensure our enlisted heritage lives on.

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